

A New Approach to Buddhist Epistemology

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Abstract: Buddhism stands unrepeated in history of the human thought not only “in denying the existence of such a soul, self, or atman”⁽¹⁾ but also in developing a concept of epistemology fundamentally based on meditation. The meditation-induced epistemology doctrine is exceptionally outstanding for its omnipresent approval and archival endurance. It was an accustomed faith of effectively all the primordial circles of Indian Buddhism, and has kept it up without advance into the present day. The current literature, however, seems not to address crucial aspects of Buddhist epistemology as a doctrine of knowledge tinged with mysticism. Many documents appear to disregard one of the rudimentary hallmarks that have always been equated with almost complications of Buddhist philosophy: **meditation** (*jhāna/dhyāna*). This article is supposed to give some accounts of such gaps, the issues of meditation as the source and culmination of mystical Buddhist epistemology.

Keywords: Buddhist epistemology; meditation; Buddhism.

1. Introduction

Like all philosophical currents, Buddhist epistemology is a doctrine of knowledge, though tinged with mysticism. The available works have examined intellectual issues, thereby showing the basic characteristics of Buddhist concept of knowledge. Buddhist knowledge, obtained from Indian philosophies, is called *pramāṇa*, “instrument of knowledge”. Buddhism recognizes only two means or sources of knowledge believed to be reliable: perception and inference.

The available literature does not address many other important issues of Buddhist epistemology, and seems to overlook one of the fundamental features that have always been associated with all problems of Buddhist philosophy: **meditation** (*jhāna/dhyāna*). One of the research gap is probably the lack of clarification of mysticism when investigating many issues related to knowledge. The literature discusses “epistemology in Buddhism” from different angles but does not seem to clarify much about “Buddhist meditation as epistemology”. In other words, the literature has not approached epistemology from the perspective of meditation, especially meditation not just like a means. Zen (禪

那), in fact, is not only cultivating but also making words. Approaching in this way, other gaps can be found regarding the mystical element that governs the essential characteristics of Buddhist knowledge from beginning to end.

This article, a new approach to the Buddhist epistemology from perspective of mediation (hereinafter referred to as **Zen Epistemology** for short), is expected to shed some light on the above gaps. It then attains the point that Buddhist epistemology, though mystical, remains useful as an effective way to help cultivate morality and train knowledge for today's society that considers knowledge as a direct production force.

2. Basic content of Zen Epistemology

2.1. Basic concepts of Zen Epistemology

2.1.1. Definition of Zen Epistemology

First, epistemology

Epistemology is the theory of knowledge, including the nature, origin, scope, proof of knowledge, and the argument of belief. Dialectical materialism emphasizes the objectivity of the process, where nature is the first, the subject is the second, and knowledge is concepts and categories. Perception is the endless process of relative truth towards absolute truth, whereby truth is also the process of countless loops, and tested through practice. According to Buddhism, epistemology is the theory of knowledge that helps to get rid of suffering, the kind of ignorance, understood as the process of cultivating the false belief that everyone has their own eternal nature. In order to get rid of suffering and to clear ignorance, we must eliminate that false belief and, therefore, see things as they really are, and attain the power of knowledge as it really is. Seeing things as they really are is a state of correct perception, clearly distinguishing between what is temporary truth and what is ultimate truth.

Second, Buddhist Zen

Zen originated from the Upanishads. Faithful to its mystical nature, Hinayana meditation has been combined with a number of other practices to attain full attention (*vipassanā*) and freedom from attachment (*samatha*). To the Mahayana, meditation continued to be modified in the direction of detailing the mystical teachings, but in essence not much different from *vipassanā* and *samatha*.

Third, Zen Epistemology

Meditation, then, is the birthplace of the first and oldest epistemology in India, not merely practice. Meditation promotes epistemology because only it is capable of “directly calling to the light of self-experience”⁽²⁾ in all stages of inner-

directed movement. The definition of Zen is, therefore, inevitably associated with the definition of Zen Epistemology.

2.1.2. Symbols of Zen Epistemology

Zen Epistemology left its mark at dawn, with varying degrees of intensity, and spread through all three stages of development in India, culminating in the Dignaga-Dharmakirti era.

2.2. Cognitive subject

Zen Epistemology considers the mind to perceive the mind to reform the mind, the pinnacle of reductionism. Mind “is pure consciousness, which contains no images of any kind, but which contemplates, or interprets, the external world directly, by the light of perception”⁽³⁾. It is as if the background is capable of living, nourishing, or sustaining all existence, arising and passing away. The subject of philosophies is the realist, or the soul, the self. The concept of mind, or in its denial of any real permanent soul or self. “Buddhism stands alone”⁽⁴⁾, in direct, even harsh, opposition to these views, popular concept. The doctrine of no-self, which was not part of the Buddha’s intention, gave rise to the theory of mind and reductionism.

2.3. Cognitive object

Buddhism only recognizes *svalakṣaṇa* (particulars) and *sāmānyalakṣaṇā* (universals). The first characteristic of particulars is that it is described as “the fundamental element of existence”. Aggregates are the sum of the mystical characters when compared to entities of the same type. If particulars are the same in the relative and absolute worlds, universals cannot be different. Therefore, particulars, which is intrinsic/unique, is the perception of absolute truth, moving towards the absolute world. And universal are just names. They are neither real, nor material, nor spiritual, nor mind-matter. They are perceived only in the relative world and are relative truths.

2.4. The nature of knowledge

The nature of knowledge that the mind acquires is that it must be regarded as right knowledge. It is knowledge that does not contradict (with experience), makes us “direct attention to the object”⁽⁵⁾. True knowledge includes direct knowledge and indirect knowledge.

2.4.1. Perception

It is a phenomenon that reflects the direct attribute of knowledge. The object of direct knowledge is uncreated and unillusioned. In other words, it is the “unique” characteristic of the self-existent being, the “entity, the unique essence that cannot be shared with anything other than itself”⁽⁶⁾. Emphasizing the

“unique” feature of particulars, existing in all direct perception must be “that unique thing that is present before my eyes when perceiving”⁽⁷⁾. To establish a strict standard for perception, Buddhism deals with the perception that approaches as the absolute, limited individuality of all constructions. The proof for the existence of the “absolute individuality”⁽⁸⁾ is that it is the moment where no interval in time can be found, does not expand in space, is unlike or similar to anything. In short, it is unique in space-time.

The strict condition is that, in the process of perceiving, the mind acquires not only the particulars (the unique) but also the universals (the image of the unique that is conceptually assigned). When perception goes through such a complicated process, the acquired knowledge certainly cannot be one but must be plural, namely four. All four forms of direct knowledge are capable of constituting an object. Thus, the object of perception is the object represented by the four knowledges labeled “direct” and such an object is “regarded as a particular”⁽⁹⁾. The four types of direct knowledge of particulars come from four sources of perception: objective perception, subjective/mental perception, self-consciousness, and transcendental intuition of the sage attained by meditation.

2.4.2. Inference

The object of inference is universals, which only consciousness can perceive. But, as mentioned above, the object of inference is also the object of perception, even though it is not the perceived object, directly perceived, not particulars. Perceived objects, in the inference stage, are encoded into mystical logical signs, manifesting in the form of “words referring to the inferred object”⁽¹⁰⁾, that is, the particulars transform into the universals. It should be noted that the logical sign, which encodes the perceived object, neither occurs from the sky nor comes directly from the object, i.e. the particular does not arbitrarily transform into the universal.

Zen Epistemology rejects the process of reasoning in such a way that the result of the former is the input to the latter, knowledge is the process of going infinitely deeper into the nature of things. Instead, Zen Epistemology considers chain of cognitive development to follow a single principle: cause and effect. According to this immutable law, the beginning is also the end point of endless repetition in the process of ignorance, perception is the process whose result is perception itself. Dependent origination is continuous, without interruption, to the extent that “there is no difference between perception and inference”⁽¹¹⁾. When considering result of inference as result of perception, drawing a line between what is and what is not is really impossible.

2.4.3. Intuition

As the content that runs through both cognitive theory and practice for more than 2,000 years, intuition is understood as something that is self-aware. It is seen as the ability in the mind of instantaneous knowledge. Moreover, Zen Epistemology places the term intuition beyond the mental process of conscious thought, since conscious thought does not necessarily access subconscious information, or convert that information into a form that can be transmitted. Going deeper into Zen Epistemology, we will see many techniques developed to help evoke intuition, such as koans (公案). Tackling this particular practice will lead to states of minor enlightenment with names like *Bodhi* (菩提), *prajna* (般若), and Buddhahood (成佛). In the schools of Chanzong (禪宗), intuition is seen as the mental state that lies between the universal mind and the particular mind, or discriminating mind.

2.5. Zen Epistemology in Vietnam

One of the basic attributes is that Vietnamese Zen Epistemology is strongly influenced by Chinese Zen or Chanzong. Contrasting this attribute is the Vietnamese Zen that favors the incarnation instead of the mundane like that of China and India. Since then, Zen seems to put an indelible mark on the Vietnamese way of thinking and is not easy to fade. Thien Uyen Tap Anh, a book specializing in Vietnamese Zen sects, confirms Vo Ngon Thong as the first Zen lineage in Vietnam. Thus, the survey of Zen in Vietnam began with Vo Ngon Thong, the school that originated in China. When establishing Bich Quan at Kien So Tu, Vo Ngon Thong taught his disciples the essence of Zen to “discover the ultimate reality of the nature of mind”⁽¹²⁾. Vo Ngon Thong also theorizes of no-self, considering that the mind not only replaces reality but also creates reality and all dharmas. Mind is neither created by people nor by any physical forces. The Dharma is born of the mind, so it also has no refuge.

Although most of the Zen sects in Vietnam were propagated from China, Vietnamese Zen still established its own path: gradually reducing its heavy dependence on mystical elements. Reducing mystic dependence leads to spiritual transformation from ecstasy to incarnation. The enterprising spirit of Vietnamese meditation is reflected in the deliberate protest against the unrealistic aspect of the doctrine of no-self.

The above-mentioned positive changes partly show that it is meditation and not any other Buddhist activity that may have attracted Buddhists, both monastic and lay people, to sink into a new worldview since the introduction of meditation. The problem is that it is almost impossible to see new thoughts

arising outside of the molded spirit of no-self and forgiveness. Surveying the basis of formation, and based on many other data, we find that the Vietnamese people's acceptance of Buddhism tends to be passive, even if the hypothesis that this religion entered our country earlier than China prevails. Moreover, Vietnamese people warmly receive meditation (if any) mainly from a humanistic perspective rather than rational, exploring the world.

3. Values and Limitation of Zen Epistemology

3.1. The value of Zen Epistemology

3.1.1. *The value of meditation in the history of Buddhism*

3.1.1.1. *The Value of Zen Epistemology in the History of Buddhism in India*

True value of meditation can be found in the most difficult period of this religion. It is not clear whether by chance or by historical arrangement, "about 300 years"⁽¹³⁾, before the decline in India. Zen Epistemology officially formed and flourished. The eve of the decline, the "Buddhist logicians" were always "the nominalists and the staunch opponents of realism"⁽¹⁴⁾. As a rival, from the 6th to the 10th centuries, Buddhist philosophy became a reference pointing to disability and also an inspiration for opposing schools to consolidate, develop and perfect their ideas.

3.1.1.2. *The value of Zen Epistemology in the history of Buddhism outside India*

The concept of mind whose culmination is the store consciousness contributes greatly to the existence and development of Buddhism. In China, the mystical mind becomes the inspiration for the next Buddhist generations. They not only maintained but also created many new ideas, culminating in Zen. The postulates about the store-consciousness, on which Vasubandhu established the element of succession as the form of self-existence, were adjusted by Chinese commentators such as Fazang (法藏), belonging to the Huáyán-zōng (華嚴宗), which took Mind Only (Yogācāra) as a religion only. To make India's rational thought of no-self softer and more in line with local trends, he formulated the theory of the unique universe, the eternal store-consciousness, and made it the basis of the concept of unity, "primordial unity"⁽¹⁵⁾.

3.1.2. *The value of Zen Epistemology in the history of philosophy*

The first and also seemingly paradoxical thing is that, while seemingly incompatible with the laws recognized by mankind, the notions of no-self, the particulars, and the universals do not prevent people from moving towards freedom. To accept the *sāmānyalakṣaṇa* (tự tướng) is the same as Zen Epistemology to reject the universals of the common law. Brushing off the universals, Zen Epistemology deals with the rejection of the inevitable,

understood as the deterministic law of nature and society. But from the perspective of religious philosophy, that concept has led believers to establish a peaceful method to pursue freedom for themselves and others.

3.1.3. *The value of Zen Epistemology in knowledge and science*

The value of Zen Epistemology in knowledge

Is it possible to attain absolutely objective knowledge of the world? Early Zen Epistemology took position that such knowledge cannot be obtained (in empirical world, of course): it is impossible and never to acquire absolutely objective and absolutely subjective knowledge. Knowledge is product of both subjective and objective at the same time, although the perceived object must always be an objective thing.

The value of Zen Epistemology in science

Among the indispensable criteria of any contemporary scientific research method, the researcher must not ignore the top two criteria: reliability and purposefulness of the research. Zen, as a study of meditation, offers interesting explanations of these two essential criteria by using them as the boundary that defines its own method of perception. According to them, every perception must have an object of perception, specifically, there must be an objective component of the object image as mentioned above, that is, there must be a prime ministerial department. To satisfy this starting condition, perceptions must satisfy two criteria simultaneously: they must be reliable, and they must be a motive for action. Zen also distinguishes cognitive reliability into two types of conditional grounds: substantive trust and superficial trust. Reliability alone is not enough for beliefs, such as “there is a fire in the hearth”⁽¹⁶⁾, to turn into reality. Instead, it must also include cognitive tendencies, that is, to answer the question of what perception is for. One of the most important tendencies is the aspiration to know, without which perception would not arise.

3.1.4. *The value of meditation in Vietnam*

With “The Vietnam country from the time of its existence until now, the Buddhadharma has been on par with China”⁽¹⁷⁾, since then, the Zen Epistemology “is imbued with the spirit of entering the world”⁽¹⁸⁾.

3.1.4.1. The spirit of entering the world in the thought of no-self

The outstanding value is perhaps the tendency to enter the world instead of out the world, which prevails both in India and in China. Once infiltrated, Zen Epistemology has transformed both theory and practice in the spirit of mundanity, especially practice, expressing deliberate resistance to the impractical aspect of the no-self doctrine.

3.1.4.2. The spirit of mundanity and humanitarian and ethical thought

The spirit of entering the world can be derived from the humanitarian tradition, making it easy to penetrate into Vietnam with humanitarian and ethical ideas.

3.2. Limitations of Zen Epistemology

First, limitations in the concept of reality

After all, are we aware of the world? Answering this question points to the greatest limitation of meditation: the denial of reality.

Second, limitations in the concept of perception

From its emphasis on no-self, Zen Epistemology leans heavily towards introspection and self-consciousness, a kind of perception that is denied by realist movements.

Third, limitations in the concept of the particulars-the universals

Besides a number of rational aspects that contribute to enhancing the value of dialectical materialist philosophy in the concept of the particular and the universal, Zen Epistemology reveals many strange conceptions about this pair of categories for which the cause is nowhere else, as has been pointed earlier, lies mainly in mystical thought and mystical logic.

Forth, limitations in the concept of truth

Zen Epistemology has two realities: (i) empirical reality or conventional truth, floating on the surface, observable by the senses; (ii) non-experienced reality or absolute truth, which lies behind experience, cannot be observed by the senses. World of experience is illusory aspect of reality, while the other is the authentic. The concept of two realities is the premise of the concept of “two truths”. That means that the knowledge gained have two types corresponding to the two worlds, which is different from the dialectical materialistic concept.

Fifth, limitations of Zen Epistemology in Vietnam

The limitation of Zen Epistemology inevitably leaves impact in Vietnam. With historical characteristics, on the one hand, it may be due to inclination to practice morality, awareness (cultivation) to eliminate suffering and karma to reach the absolute truth, Zen Epistemology is difficult to encourage the acquisition of new knowledge, of stimulating creativity, and aspiration to rise up and improve life in the real world that is considered only a relative, artificial reality. Under Vietnam's specificity, on the other hand, this limitation may also lead to negative impacts like the increasing the passivity of receiving, the limitation of the creation of new knowledge, the little interest in background theory, and the difficulty to maintain internal force; etc.

Conclusion

The article shows that Zen Epistemology was nurtured at the dawn of time, spanning thousands of years by a series of beliefs and fantasies related to unusual experiences and states of mind. Furthermore, all processes converge towards no-self, deviating from the Buddha's middle way.

The article studies interaction between mysticism of meditation and cognitive reasoning and its consequences. Regarding the factors and conditions that regulate meditation, Buddha personally plays a decisive role. His biographical and pedigree (not strictly monarchical) documents help us to explain why he was more forward-thinking than many contemporary thinkers and princes. However, the movement of Indian history and within Buddhism caused Buddhism to gradually get rid of middle-class thought and become more and more extreme and mystical until it completes Zen Epistemology in the era of Dignaga-Dharmakirti. Among factors that caused Zen Epistemology to change drastically after Buddha's death, the decisive transformation is perhaps ontological logic, intellectual reasoning and, in particular, the concept of the subject. This transformation, related to the self or soul, gives a different appearance and is prominent in logic of meditation.

Despite most of it being propagated from China, Vietnamese Zen Epistemology still finds its own way: reducing mystical dependence, leading to a transition from out-of-the-world to the worldly thought, manifesting in deliberate resistance against the unrealistic aspect of the no-self doctrine. The lines of meditation, however, are inclined in application instead of studying the scriptures, mainly approaching from a humanistic perspective rather than rational, exploring the world.

With that in mind, the article shows that Zen Epistemology, both as theory and practice of perceiving the world from a Buddhist point of view, brings value in many areas besides some limitations. Entering Vietnam, it not only contributes to enriching treasure of ancient literature but is also worth experiencing for many generations.

In Vietnam, Zen Epistemology becomes patriotism in terms of both social thinking and practice over the past 1000 years. The idea of Vietnam Zen Day, besides the United Nations World Yoga Day, should we consider to announce it to encourage the people to learn meditation, practice ethics and meditate, thereby, help improve the quality of life, ability of intuition, contributing to improved reflexes to quickly and effectively handle problems in increasingly urgent, stressful, and constantly changing works./.

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